

Wires 09/23/20

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Militia Group Seen Patrolling Streets in Louisville After Breonna Taylor Announcement

WASHINGTON, September 23 (Sputnik) - Video footage from Louisville, Kentucky, on Wednesday showed a militia group patrolling the streets downtown following the state Attorney General's decision to not file criminal charges against police officers involved in the death of African-American woman Breonna Taylor.

A reporter with WDRB news station in Louisville posted video on Twitter showing a militia group patrolling in downtown Louisville.

There are no laws in Kentucky that prohibit residents from openly carrying firearms in public. Other video footage from Louisville on Wednesday showed a clash between large groups of law enforcement officers and protesters.

A police officer was seen firing rubber bullets at the crowd of demonstrators and at least ten protesters were detained by police after the clash.

Earlier in the day, Louisville Metro Police Department Chief Robert Schroeder said during a briefing that US federal agents and the Kentucky National Guard have deployed to the city to help local law enforcement prepare to quell any civil unrest.

Kentucky Attorney General Daniel Cameron announced on Wednesday that the use of force by two police officers in Breonna Taylor's death in March was justified under state law after they were fired upon by Taylor's boyfriend. Cameron said this justification bars them from pursuing charges in Taylor's deaths.

Taylor was killed in her Louisville home in March when police officers executed a drug search warrant. Taylor's boyfriend allegedly fired a first shot in self-defense fearing the entrants were burglars, which prompted the four police officers to unleash a hail of bullets on the house, hitting Taylor six times.

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Wall Street's Rout Extends With US Technology Stocks Down 3% on Wednesday

NEW YORK, September 23 (Sputnik) - The rout on Wall Street showed little signs of abating on Wednesday, with the Nasdaq Composite index leading losses again amid concerns about overvaluation for big tech companies and worries about a new wave of novel coronavirus infections in Europe.

Nasdaq, which lists tech giants such as Facebook, Apple, Apple, Netflix and Google, ended down 330 points, or 3 percent. The Nasdaq has lost almost 10 percent for September, falling from record highs of 12,074.

The S&P 500, a barometer for the top 500 US stocks, fell almost 79 points on the day, or 2.4 percent. The index has lost almost 8 percent on the month, sliding from all-time highs of 3,588. The Dow Jones Industrial Average, the broadest indicator on the New York Stock Exchange, slumped 525 points, or nearly 2 percent, on the day. The Dow has slid almost 6 percent for September.

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Police in Riot Gear Clash With Protesters in Louisville After Breonna Taylor Announcement

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Police officers were seen firing rubber bullets at the crowd of demonstrators and detaining at least ten protesters.

Earlier on Wednesday, Louisville Metro Police Department Chief Robert Schroeder said that US federal agents and the Kentucky National Guard have deployed to the city to help local law enforcement prepare to quell any civil unrest.

Video footage from Louisville showed National Guard personnel driving through downtown in armored vehicles following the state Attorney General's announcement.

Other video from the city showed protesters near the Breonna Taylor memorial in downtown Louisville lighting trashcans on fire and expressing outrage after a grand jury's decision to indict one former police officer for endangering residents who lived in an apartment next door to Taylor's when the fatal police raid occurred in March.

Some television news footage also showed large groups of people protesting peacefully after the announcement.

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TikTok Files Court Action Against Restriction on US App Downloads - Court Document

WASHINGTON, September 23 (Sputnik) - The Chinese company ByteDance and its video sharing platform TikTok have taken legal action in court to challenge the US government restrictions on the download of its services in the United States, according to a court document.

"The plaintiffs are entitled to preliminary injunctive relief enjoining the implementation or enforcement of the executive order issued on August 6, 2020," TikTok and ByteDance said in the court document filed against President Donald Trump and the US Commerce Department.

Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross, acting on the White House's instruction, had said that downloads of TikTok and WeChat - another social media application run by China's Tencent - will be restricted from Apple's Playstore and Android's Google Play beginning on September 20. Tencent has not filed any legal action against the Trump administration.

ByteDance and TikTok legal action asking the court to block the White House order on its application came as they dropped a lawsuit filed earlier against Trump, Ross and the Commerce Department for violating their right to due process.

Trump's ban of TikTok was set for September 20, but has been postponed to November 12 as the administration offered the company a way out by being acquired by a US entity. The US president said software firm Oracle and retail giant Walmart were in final talks for control of TikTok's equity and technology. However, ByteDance has insisted on maintaining an 80 percent stake in the restructured US version of TikTok.

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Trump Says 2020 US Presidential Election May End Up in Supreme Court

WASHINGTON, September 23 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump said on Wednesday that he thinks the 2020 US presidential election will end up in the Supreme Court, adding that it is important to immediately fill the vacancy left after Justice Ruth Ginsburg's death.

"I think this will end up in the Supreme Court," Trump told reporters. "And I think it's important we have nine justices."

The White House said Trump will announce his pick for a Supreme Court justice on Saturday at 5:00 p.m. EST (9:00 p.m. GMT).

The 87-year-old Ginsburg, one of the nine judges on the Supreme Court and a liberal supported by the Democrats, died on September 18 of complications from metastatic pancreatic cancer. Before her passing, the Supreme Court had a 5-4 conservative majority, but some justices like John Roberts have often ruled in agreement with the liberal justices.

The move by Trump and the Republicans to fill in the vacancy six weeks before the November 3 presidential election is being contested by the Democrats who argue former President Barack Obama did not fill a vacancy left with the passing of Justice Antonin Scalia in 2016 before the presidential election.

Trump, who won the 2016 race, now faces as his opponent Obama's former Vice President Joe Biden.

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RPT - State Dept on Inauguration in Belarus: US Can Not Consider Lukashenko Legitimate President

WASHINGTON, September 23 (Sputnik) - The United States can not consider Alexander Lukashenko to be a legitimately elected president of Belarus despite the inauguration for his sixth term in office, a US State Department spokesperson told Sputnik on Wednesday.

"The elections on August 9 were neither free nor fair. The announced results were fraudulent and did not convey legitimacy," the spokesperson said. "The United States cannot consider Alexander Lukashenko the legitimately elected leader of Belarus."

Earlier on Wednesday, Lukashenko, whose victory in the August election is being contested by the country's opposition, was reported to have been sworn in office in a closed ceremony.

The State Department spokesperson said the path forward in Belarus should be marked by a national dialogue leading to the Belarusian people choosing their leaders in a free and fair election under independent observation.

"The release of those unjustly detained and an end of repression against peacefully protesting citizens is a first step toward genuine national dialogue," the spokesperson said.

While the inauguration ceremony was not publicly announced in advance, several hundred people were present at the event at the Palace of Independence, including officials, lawmakers, athletes and media representatives.

Lukashenko secured his sixth term in office having won 80.1 percent of the votes in the August 9 election. However, the Belarusian opposition has rejected the result, triggering nationwide protests that are still ongoing.

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US Federal Forces Deploy to Louisville as Protesters Decry Taylor Verdict - Police Chief

WASHINGTON, September 23 (Sputnik) - US federal agents and the Kentucky National Guard have deployed to the city of Louisville to help local law enforcement prepare to quell any violence following the state Attorney General's announcement that no criminal charges will be filled against police officers in the killing of African-American woman Breonna Taylor, Louisville Metro Police Department Chief Robert Schroeder said during a briefing on Wednesday.

"We have a variety of federal partners on hand, including the FBI, ATF, Federal Protective Services and many others helping out. The National Guard will be assisting us," Schroeder said.

Earlier in the day, Kentucky Attorney General Daniel Cameron said the deadly use of force by two police officers involved in Taylor's killing was justified in order to protect themselves, so state law prohibits his office from pursuing criminal charges against them.

Video from Louisville showed National Guard personnel driving through downtown Louisville in armored vehicles following the state Attorney General's announcement.

Other video from the city showed protesters near the Breonna Taylor memorial in downtown Louisville lighting trashcans on fire and expressing outrage after a grand jury's decision to indict one former police officer for endangering residents who lived in an apartment next door to Taylor's when the fatal police raid happened in March.

In addition, television news footage showed large groups of people protesting peacefully after the announcement.

Taylor was killed when the police officers executed a drug search warrant and her boyfriend allegedly fired a first shot fearing the entrants were burglars. The shot prompted three police officers to unleash a hail of bullets on the house, hitting Taylor six times.

The killing of the 26-year-old African American medical technician was initially overshadowed by the onset of the novel coronavirus pandemic that began to sweep the country around the same time. Activists, celebrities and demonstrators have since made it a point to keep her name in the news cycle and call for justice over her death.

Louisville Mayor Greg Fischer announced last week that the city will pay \$12 million to Taylor's family as part of a settlement for her death.

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"I think this will end up in the Supreme Court," Trump told reporters. "And I think it's important we have nine justices."

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Breonna Taylor Family Attorney Calls Charges Against Officer After Probe 'Offensive'

WASHINGTON, September 23 (Sputnik) - Attorney Benjamin Crump, who is representing Breonna Taylor's family, said in a statement on Wednesday that the charges announced earlier in the day against a former police officer in connection to the 26-year-old Africa American woman's death are outrageous and offensive.

"Jefferson County Grand Jury indicts former [officer] Brett Hankison with 3 counts of Wanton Endangerment in 1st Degree for bullets that went into other apartments but NOTHING for the murder of Breonna Taylor. This is outrageous and offensive," Crump said in a statement via Twitter.

Earlier on Wednesday, a US grand jury in Jefferson County, Kentucky, indicted Hankison with three counts of wanton endangerment in the first-degree after shots he fired during the police raid of Taylor's apartment went into an apartment next door and seriously endangered the three residents inside.

US Judge Annie O'Connell issued a warrant for Hankison's arrest and his bond was set at \$15,000. If convicted on all three counts, Hankison could face up to 15 years in prison.

Kentucky Attorney General Daniel Cameron announced earlier in the day that the use of force by two police officers in Breonna Taylor's death in March was justified under state law after they were fired upon by Taylor's boyfriend. Cameron said this justification bars them from pursuing charges against the two officers.

Cameron added that, according to evidence, the police officers knocked on the Taylor apartment's door and announced their presence - contrary to initial reports that police officers executed a no-knock drug search warrant late at night.

Cameron said the FBI is still conducting its investigation into whether any federal laws were violated by the officers.

Taylor was killed in March when three police officers executed a drug search warrant and her boyfriend allegedly fired a first shot fearing the entrants were burglars. The shot prompted the four police officers to unleash a hail of bullets on the house, hitting Taylor six times.

The killing of the 26-year-old African American medical technician was initially overshadowed by the onset of the novel coronavirus pandemic that began to sweep the country around the same time. Activists, celebrities and demonstrators have since made it a point to keep her name in the news cycle and call for justice over her death.

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Use of Force by Officers in Breonna Taylor's Death Justified - State Attorney General

WASHINGTON, September 23 (Sputnik) - Kentucky Attorney General Daniel Cameron announced on Wednesday that the fatal use of force by two police officers against Breonna Taylor, a 26-year old Black woman, was justified and no criminal charges will be filed against them.

"While there are six possible homicide charges under Kentucky law, these charges are not applicable to the facts before us because our investigation showed and the grand jury agreed that [officer Jonathan] Mattingly and [detective Myles] Cosgrove were justified in their return of deadly fire after having been fired upon by [Taylor's boyfriend] Kenneth Walker," Cameron said. Cameron said this justification bars his office from pursuing criminal charges against the police officers in connection to Taylor's death.

Moreover, Cameron said evidence shows officers knocked and announced their presence at Taylor's apartment when serving their warrant. Cameron said the warrant was not served as a no-knock warrant as initially reported.

Cameron said Mattingly and Cosgrove were fired upon by Walker when they breached the apartment. Mattingly, who was shot in the leg by Walker, fired six shots and Cosgrove fired 16 shots, Cameron said.

A total of six bullets hit Taylor and, according to medical evidence, only one shot was fatal, Cameron said.

A US grand jury in Jefferson County, Kentucky, has indicted former police officer Brett Hankison with three counts of wanton endangerment in the first-degree after shots he fired during the police raid of Taylor's apartment went into an apartment next door and seriously endangered the three residents inside.

A warrant has been issued for Hankison's arrest and his bond will be set at \$15,000. He faces up to 15 years in prison if convicted.

Cameron said the FBI is continuing its investigation into potential violations under federal law. Taylor was killed when the police officers executed a drug search warrant and her boyfriend allegedly fired a first shot fearing the entrants were burglars. The shot prompted the four police officers to unleash a hail of bullets on the house, hitting Taylor six times.

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Alaska's Sitka to Relocate Baranov Statue to Museum by End of October - Director

WASHINGTON, September 23 (Sputnik) - Authorities of the Alaskan city of Sitka will move the statue of the first Russian America Governor, Alexander Baranov, from downtown to a local history museum by the end of October, the museum's Executive Director Hal Spackman told Sputnik on Wednesday.

"I expect the statue to be re-located to its permanent home in the museum before the end of October," Spackman said.

In July, the city assembly adopted a resolution to relocate the Baranov statue to the Sitka Historical Society Museum, after a group of local activists urged legislators to remove it, citing mistreatment of indigenous people. In 1799, Baranov founded Sitka - called at that time Novo-Archangelsk - as the capital of the Russian colonies in North America.

"We are currently in the process of working with City of Sitka maintenance staff to remove the statue from the rock to which it is affixed and transport it to our museum, which is less than 50 yards from its present location," Spackman said.

A local carpenter will build an appropriate and solid foundation for the statue, he added.

The Russian Cultural Center in Alaska offered assistance with the process of moving and providing information about Baranov, but nothing specific has been discussed so far, the museum's director noted.

"Our organization will welcome any help outside entities can offer," Spackman said.

In July, the Russian Community Council of the USA (RCC), which previously organized a petition and collected almost 6,000 signatures against removing the statue, sent a letter to the museum asking that it cooperate with the Russian diaspora in providing comprehensive information about Baranov to visitors.

Statues of several historical figures associated with racism have been removed, toppled or defaced across the United States amid nationwide protests fueled by multiple police-involved killings of African Americans.

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US Federal Forces deploy to Louisville as Protesters Decry Taylor Verdict - Police Chief

WASHINGTON, September 23 (Sputnik) - US federal agents and the Kentucky National Guard have deployed to the city of Louisville to help local law enforcement prepare to quell any violence following the state Attorney General's announcement that no criminal charges will be filled against police officers in the killing of African-American woman Breonna Taylor, Louisville Metro Police Department Chief Robert Schroeder said during a briefing on Wednesday.

"We have a variety of federal partners on hand, including the FBI, ATF, Federal Protective Services and many others helping out. The National Guard will be assisting us," Schroeder said. Earlier in the day, Kentucky Attorney General Daniel Cameron said the deadly use of force by two police officers involved in Taylor's killing was justified in order to protect themselves, so state law prohibits his office from pursuing criminal charges against them.

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ANALYSIS - Biden Likely to Follow Trump's NATO Game Plan if Elected

WASHINGTON, September 23 (Sputnik) - Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden if elected would likely continue the Trump administration's policies of strengthening NATO's military presence in Eastern Europe and pressing allies to boost defense spending, analysts told Sputnik.

SAME PATH, DIFFERENT STYLE

During a televised "town hall" meeting in the key swing state of Pennsylvania last week, Biden signaled that he would be much tougher on Russia than Trump has been and vowed to strengthen US relations with its allies. The former vice president claimed Russian President Vladimir Putin wants to break up NATO to avoid facing a full alliance contingent.

On closer inspection, however, the national security policies Biden has supported or proposed ironically look a lot like Trump's - especially when it comes to NATO.

Trump, to be sure, has gone to great lengths to force NATO allies to increase their defense spending contributions. For example, earlier this year, he ordered the redeployment of troops from Germany to punish Berlin for underpaying alliance dues.

However Biden, just like Trump, is expected to keep pressuring allies, including Germany, when it comes to meeting NATO quotas, Politico reported on Monday, citing campaign sources.

Biden and other critics slammed Trump's decision to relocate US troops from Germany without acknowledging that almost half of the forces will be re-positioned within Europe to strengthen the alliance's eastern flank. In other words, the troops will be moved closer to Russia's borders.

In 2018, Biden in an article for Foreign Affairs also proposed boosting NATO's military capabilities in a way that does not deviate from Trump's game plan significantly. Brookings Institution scholar Michael O'Hanlon believes Biden's proposal is in line with Trump's designs. "[Biden's proposal]... relates to some of what Trump has been doing or now plans to - strengthening the US posture in Poland, for example, and facilitating the logistics that would be needed to send US forces through Poland to the Baltic states in a crisis," O'Hanlon told Sputnik. University of California Santa Cruz Emeritus Professor of Politics, Ronnie Lipschutz, said Biden, of course, would have no choice but to act to support NATO in order to reassure America's allies.

"It's clear that diminishing it [NATO] makes the Europeans and many in DC very uncomfortable," Lipschutz told Sputnik.

Lipschutz, the author of "Constitution of Imperium," which analyzes how Washington and its allies use institutions like NATO to maintain global hegemony, said he would actually like to see Europe constitute an independent defense force to balance against the US.

Moscow, for its part, has long argued that the NATO military buildup near Russia's borders only serves to increase the chances for sparking a conflict.

This is one of the reasons why Lipschutz hopes Biden abandons the strategy to increase NATO's military capabilities.

"It would only feed the voracious appetites of the Pentagon and defense industry - and antagonize Russia - which we don't need, whatever one thinks of Russia these days," Lipschutz said.

Despite these similarities, however, Lipschutz said he would trust Biden to take a more thoughtful approach.

"I find it difficult to identify any logic or coherence in Trump's policies vis-a-vis Europe. He seems to view international politics as the same as competition with other billionaires. So, anything Biden might do would be a lot better," Lipschutz said.

US-RUSSIA OPPORTUNITIES UNDER BIDEN?

Trump has often declared that he wants to improve relations with Moscow, yet US-Russian relations have reached a low-point. Some hope, if he is elected, Biden's actions will not match his anti-Russian rhetoric on the campaign trail, because there are areas where Moscow and Washington share common interests.

Biden, as vice president, actually pushed back against the Obama administration's more hawkish policies. He opposed the Libya intervention and the surge in Afghanistan. In addition, he openly questioned the wisdom of arming extremists in Syria.

O'Hanlon said Moscow and Washington could work together towards diplomatic deals for peace on the situations in Syria and Libya among other opportunities.

"And then there's Iran policy, where Biden will likely return to the JCPOA and thus to being in lockstep with Russia, whatever that may get us," O'Hanlon said.

Although the former vice president wants to maintain US sanctions on Russia related to the Ukraine crisis, O'Hanlon doubts Biden would "rock the boat" too much.

"We have sort of reached a 'new normal' of low-grade, ongoing, and constrained hostilities in eastern Ukraine - and of course, a firm Russian hold on Crimea. There's not much reason to go looking for trouble, so to speak, unless the Russians step up the provocations," O'Hanlon added.

The think tank scholar also suggested that even more could be done, although some might claim it sounds like wishful thinking.

"Ideally, too, we'd actually try to solve the Ukraine problem with a negotiated settlement on the Donbas and a lifting of sanctions on Russia. But that seems like a moonshot at present," O'Hanlon observed.

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California to Ban Sale of Gasoline Powered Cars From 2035 - Governor

WASHINGTON, September 23 (Sputnik) - California, the largest US automobile market, is moving towards zero emissions in the next 15 years by banning the sale of new gasoline powered passenger vehicles starting in 2035, Governor Gavin Newsroom said on Wednesday.

"We're not going to take away the gasoline cars that you drive now but we are committed to getting to zero emissions by 2035," Newsom said in a live-streamed event.

Under the executive order by Newsom, which he symbolically signed on the hood of a Ford "green car", California would end the sales of new gasoline-powered vehicles in a state of nearly 40 million people.

The largest economy of America's 50 states, California leads on auto emissions standards. The order by Newsom is likely to run into stiff opposition from President Donald Trump, who champions fossil fuels and America's shale fracking/drilling industry and has been trying to force California to comply with his move to roll back tougher Obama-era auto emissions standards.

"I want to put fracking in perspective: It's less than 2 percent of the [oil] production in the State of California but we're 50 percent of the [automobile] market," Newsom told a news conference

after the signing. "We just want to fundamentally reconcile with the fact that we're no longer living in the 19th century, and we don't need to drill things, extract things in order to advance." The governor also said that California will likely roll out from January incentives for buying electric and other cleaner emissions vehicles, acknowledging that the present price tag of more than \$30,000 for a so-called e-vehicle like Tesla remained out of the reach of many Americans.

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US Grand Jury Indicts 1 Police Officer in Breonna Taylor's Death - Judge

WASHINGTON, September 23 (Sputnik) - A US grand jury in Jefferson County, Kentucky, has indicted former police officer Brett Hankison for his role in the events that occurred during the police raid that resulted in the death of Breonna Taylor, Judge Annie O'Connell said during a virtual reading of the charges on Wednesday.

O'Connell said Hankison has been charged with three counts of wanton endangerment in the first-degree after shots he fired during the police raid of Taylor's apartment went into an apartment next door and seriously endangered the three residents inside.

A warrant has been issued for Hankison's arrest and his bond will be set at \$15,000, O'Connell said.

Kentucky Attorney General Daniel Cameron announced that the use of force by two police officers in Breonna Taylor's death in March was justified under state law after they were fired upon by Taylor's boyfriend. Cameron said this justification bars them from pursuing charges in Taylor's deaths.

Cameron added that, according to a civilian witness, the police officers knocked on the Taylor apartment's door and announced their presence - contrary to initial reports that police officers executed a no-knock drug search warrant late at night.

Taylor was killed when the police officers executed the drug search warrant and her boyfriend allegedly fired a first shot fearing the entrants were burglars. The shot prompted the four police officers to unleash a hail of bullets on the house, hitting Taylor eight times.

The killing of the 26-year-old African American medical technician was initially overshadowed by the onset of the novel coronavirus pandemic that began to sweep the country around the same time. Activists, celebrities and demonstrators have since made it a point to keep her name in the news cycle and call for justice over her death.

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House Republicans Will Move to Oust Pelosi if She Tries to Impeach Trump - Minority Leader

WASHINGTON, September 23 (Sputnik) - Republicans will try to take action to remove US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi if she tries to launch a new impeachment process against President Donald Trump, Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy said in a press conference on Wednesday.

"If she [Pelosi] tries to move for an impeachment, I think there will be a move on the floor to the question that she should no longer be Speaker," McCarthy told the Capitol Hill press conference. McCarthy said Pelosi was not the only House leader with political options to use just because her party controlled the chamber with its majority.

"She thinks she has a quiver [of political arrows]. We do too. We will take the movement to remove her from speakership," McCarthy said.

According to the Washington newspaper Politico, Democratic Party leaders in Congress are not seriously trying to impeach Trump administration officials in order to slow down the confirmation process of the next Supreme Court Justice to replace Ruth Bader Ginsburg.

According to Politico, Republican conservatives have been pressuring McCarthy to present a "motion to vacate" the Speaker's chair. That would need at least 20 Democrats to join all Republicans in the House to topple Pelosi as Speaker.

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TikTok, ByteDance Voluntarily Dismiss Lawsuit Against Trump - Court Document

WASHINGTON, September 23 (Sputnik) - The Chinese company ByteDance and its video sharing platform TikTok have dropped the lawsuit against US President Donald Trump and the Department of Commerce, a court document showed on Wednesday.

"Please take notice that plaintiffs TikTik Inc and ByteDance Ltd ... hereby voluntarily dismiss this action without prejudice as to defendants Donald J. Trump, Wilbur L. Ross and the US Department of Commerce," according to an electronic image of the court document filed by the plaintiffs and seen by Sputnik.

TikTok has been in the news since August after Trump threatened to ban the application in the United States, citing concerns about alleged Chinese government spying on data of US users. TikTok and ByteDance then sued Trump, saying his administration's action was without any prior outreach to the company that would give it a chance to respond to the accusations - a violation of the US Constitution and the firm's right to due process.

Trump's ban of TikTok was originally to take effect on September 20, but has been extended to November 12 as the administration offered the company a one way out by selling itself to a US entity.

Trump has said the software firm Oracle and retail giant Walmart are in the final stages of negotiations for control of TikTok's equity and technology.

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California to Ban Sale of Gasoline Powered Cars From 2035 - Governor

WASHINGTON, September 23 (Sputnik) - California is moving towards zero emissions in the next 15 years by banning the sale of new gasoline powered passenger vehicles starting in 2035, Governor Gavin Newsom said on Wednesday.

"We're not going to take away the gasoline cars that you drive now but we are committed to getting to zero emissions by 2035," Newsom said in a live-streamed event.

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International Support Group Urges Lebanon's Leaders to Immediately Form New Government

UNITED NATIONS, September 23 (Sputnik) - The members of the International Support Group (ISG) for Lebanon in a joint statement on Wednesday called on the country's leaders to show unity to allow the timely formation of a new government that would be able to meet the legitimate aspirations of the Lebanese people.

Earlier on Wednesday, on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly, the ISG held a virtual ministerial meeting co-chaired by the organization's Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and French Minister of Foreign Affairs Jean-Yves Le Drian.

"Members of the ISG urged Lebanon's leaders to unite in support of the timely formation of a government able to meet the legitimate aspirations expressed by the Lebanese people and committed to addressing Lebanon's multiple and acute challenges, notably its humanitarian, socio-economic and financial crises, the COVID-19 pandemic, the reconstruction of Beirut and the restoration of Beirut's heritage and historical buildings," the statement said.

Mustafa Adib, who was appointed Lebanon's prime minister in late August, has not yet been able to present a new cabinet, despite the conditions of French President Emmanuel Macron, under which a new government was to be formed in Lebanon by September 14.

If this condition is met, Macron pledged to hold a conference on aid to Lebanon in Paris in October. The process of forming a government has become more difficult after the United States imposed new unilateral sanctions against two former Lebanese ministers, whom the US administration has accused of being connected with the Shiite movement Hezbollah.

The Hassan Diab government stepped down shortly after a devastating explosion in the Beirut port on August 4 killed at least 190 people and injured over 5,000 others. According to the Lebanese authorities, the explosion was caused by improper storage of 2,750 metric tons of ammonium nitrate.

The ISG also urged Lebanese political leaders to undertake critical reforms that would address the issues the country is currently facing and restore economic stability, improve the delivery of public goods and the credibility of the financial sector, the statement said.

It added that the ISG members asked the government to implement measures to fight corruption, tax evasions and undertake other measures ensuring substantial changes, transparency and full accountability to the Lebanese people.

The ISG, comprised of the United Nations, the European Union, the Arab League, China, France, Germany, Italy, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States, was set up in 2013 to help mobilize support for Lebanon.

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US Grand Jury Indicts 1 Police Officer in Breonna Taylor Killing - Judge

WASHINGTON, September 23 (Sputnik) - A US grand jury in Jefferson County, Kentucky, has indicted former police officer Brett Hankison on multiple criminal charges in the killing of Breonna Taylor, Judge Annie O'Connell said during a virtual reading of the charges on Wednesday.

O'Connell said Hankison has been charged with three counts of wanton endangerment in the first-degree.

A warrant has been issued for Hankison's arrest and his bond will be set at \$15,000, O'Connell said.

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US Adds 433 Hotels in Cuba on Prohibited Accommodations List - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 23 (Sputnik) - The United States has added more than 400 hotels in Cuba to its Prohibited Accommodations list, restricting US citizens from using the listed facilities, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Carrie Filipetti told reporters on Wednesday.

"This list includes 433 properties at the current time, all of which have some affiliation with the Cuban regime or regime insiders," Filipetti said during a telephone briefing.

Earlier on Wednesday, the Trump administration announced new sanctions against Cuba, including a ban on Americans to use hotels owned by the island nation's leadership and close relatives.

Filipetti said Washington did not inform in advance its foreign partners about the restrictive measure will follow up with them later.

Filipetti noted the importance of prioritizing of moral principles and values over commercial interests, pointing out that the facilities are being used to enrich the Cuban leaders and military.

The Treasury Department issued a statement saying any person subject to US jurisdiction will be prohibited from lodging, paying for lodging or making any reservation for or on behalf of a third party to lodge at any property that the US authorities have identified as owned or controlled by the Cuban government, a prohibited Cuban official or member of the Cuban Communist Party and their close relatives.

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US Energy Executives Do Not See Much Recovery Left in 2020 - Dallas Fed Survey

WASHINGTON, September 23 (Sputnik) - Executives in the US energy industry are not placing much hope on business recovering for the rest of the year amid the coronavirus pandemic, the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas said in a survey released Wednesday.

"Activity in the oil and gas sector declined modestly in third quarter 2020, according to oil and gas executives," the Dallas Fed Energy Survey said. "The business activity index - the survey's broadest measure of conditions facing Eleventh District energy firms - remained in negative territory but improved from -66.1 in the second quarter to -6.6 in the third quarter, suggesting that the pace of the contraction has significantly."

The survey said oil and gas production indexes rose significantly but remained negative, suggesting a moderation in production declines.

"Conditions among oilfield services firms continued to deteriorate, albeit at a slower rate," it said. "Firms found some relief as the input costs continued to decline (but) labor-related indicators fell again. The aggregate employment index posted a sixth consecutive negative reading."

It said the company outlook index returned to barely positive territory in the third quarter. "The near-zero reading indicates the outlook remained relatively unchanged, a stabilization from the sharp deterioration seen over the prior two quarters. Additionally, fewer firms noted rising uncertainty this quarter than last, and the aggregate uncertainty index fell 19 points to 17.2."

As for oil prices, the respondents expected the US crude benchmark, the West Texas Intermediate (WTI), to average \$43.27 per barrel by end-2020, from Wednesday's level of around \$40 a barrel. Henry Hub natural gas prices were forecast to average \$2.55 per million British thermal units, compared with current prices hovering at \$2.11 per mmbtu.

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US Reviewing Influence of 2 Chinese 'United Front' Operations - Pompeo

WASHINGTON, September 23 (Sputnik) - The US State Department is currently reviewing two Chinese government organizations working in the United States over concerns about their alleged attempts to influence various public groups, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in his remarks at the Wisconsin state Capitol on Wednesday.

"The State Department is reviewing the activities of two United Front Work Department organizations operating inside the United States... the US-China Friendship Association [and] the China Council for the Promotion of Peaceful Reunification," Pompeo said. "These organizations have apparently attempted to exert influence on groups all across the public sphere, including in our schools, in our business associations, impacting local politicians, media outlets, and Chinese groups here inside the United States."

Pompeo said Washington is set to protect American kids from China's "malign influence." "We've formally designated the Confucius Institute's US headquarters as a foreign mission, and encouraged universities to shutter their doors on these programs quickly," he reminded. "We've put restrictions on Chinese diplomats that mirror the ones American diplomats are subject to inside of China."

The FBI opens a China-related IP theft case about every 10 hours while the State Department just revoked visas for 1,000 Chinese nationals, he added.

Under the Trump administration, US-China relations have significantly deteriorated, with Washington accusing Beijing of unfair economic practices, human rights violations and lack of transparency with regard to the COVID-19 outbreak. China has denied the accusations and, in its turn, pointed to various violations of international law on the part of the US.

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Louisville Mayor Orders 72-Hour Curfew Ahead of Breonna Taylor Probe Announcement

WASHINGTON, September 23 (Sputnik) - Louisville Mayor Greg Fischer on Wednesday announced that he has issued an order to impose a 72-hour county-wide curfew in anticipation of the Kentucky Attorney General's announcement whether criminal charges will be filed against police officers involved in Breonna Taylor's death in March.

The Kentucky Attorney General is scheduled to make the announcement at 1:30 p.m. ET (5:30 p.m. GMT).

"My third executive order sets a county-wide, 72-hour curfew from 9:00 p.m. to 6:30 a.m. beginning tonight," Fischer said during a press conference.

A state of emergency was previously declared in Louisville ahead of the state Attorney General's announcement.

Taylor was killed in her Louisville home in March when police officers executed a no-knock drug search warrant late at night. Taylor's boyfriend fired a shot in self-defense fearing the entrants were burglars, which prompted four police officers to unleash a barrage of bullets on the house, hitting Taylor eight times.

Fischer announced last week that the city of Louisville will pay \$12 million to Taylor's family as part of a settlement for her death.

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US Probing Allegations of Hysterectomies Performed on Migrant Women Without Consent - Wolf

WASHINGTON, September 23 (Sputnik) - US Acting Secretary of Homeland Security Chad Wolf said during a congressional hearing on Wednesday that the Office of Inspector General

(OIG) is currently investigating allegations of hysterectomies having been performed on migrant women without consent at an immigration facility in the US state of Georgia.

"It is my understanding that the OIG has individuals on the ground in that facility in Georgia," Wolf said. "They will be talking with those individuals today-tomorrow."

Wolf noted that while some of the facts on the ground do not support the allegations, anybody found responsible to engage in such practices will be held accountable if the claims are confirmed.

"I will take very decisive action, but at this point, they are allegations and we need to make sure that we fully investigate them," Wolf said.

On Monday, a whistleblower complaint was filed by a nurse at a US Immigration and Customs Enforcement facility in Georgia alleging that hysterectomies were being performed on detained migrant women without their informed consent.

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Trump to Name Supreme Court Pick at 5:00 p.m. EST on Saturday - White House

*WASHINGTON, September 23 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump will announce his pick for a Supreme Court judge on Saturday at 5:00 p.m. EST (9:00 p.m. GMT), the White House said in a notice, affirming the controversial move to replace the late Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg weeks ahead of the country's election.

"President Donald J. Trump's Announcement of the Nominee for Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States (scheduled on) Saturday, September 26, 2020," the White House said in a one-page notice issued Wednesday.

The 87-year-old Ginsburg, one of the nine judges on the Supreme Court and a liberal supported by Trump's Democrat rivals, died on September 18 of complications from metastatic pancreatic cancer. Before her passing, the court was already stacked with a 5-4 conservative majority. The move by Trump and his Republican to rush and fill her seat six weeks before the November 3 presidential election is being hotly contested by Democrats who argue that President Barack Obama was being prevented from doing the same when another Supreme Court judge, Antonin Scalia died in 2016 before that year's presidential election. Trump, who won that race, now faces Obama's former vice president Joe Biden, a Democrat who's leading in the polls for the upcoming election.

On Tuesday, Trump told reporters all nine seats on the Supreme Court must be filled before the election to prevent the mail-in ballot "scam." Trump has repeatedly claimed that mail-in ballots will lead to widespread vote fraud. Many believe more Democrats are likely use the mail-in ballot option, as opposed to voting in person, over COVID-19 concerns.

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US Sanctions 8 Individuals, 7 Entities Over Alleged Russian Interference - Treasury

WASHINGTON, September 23 (Sputnik) - The United States has imposed sanctions on eight individuals - Russian citizens or persons of Russian decent - and seven entities in Russia, Finland and the Central African Republic over alleged foreign interference and sanctions evasion, the US Department of the Treasury announced in a statement on Wednesday.

"Today, the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) took further action against the network of Kremlin-connected Russian operative Yevgeniy Prigozhin (Prigozhin), by targeting entities and individuals working on behalf of Prigozhin to advance Russia's influence in the Central African Republic (CAR). Concurrently, OFAC is targeting those that have supported the Russian Federal Security Service directly, as well as those that assist persons helping designated Russian actors to evade US sanctions," the statement said.

The Treasury Department imposed sanctions on two companies allegedly owned by Prigozhin that are conducting mining operations in CAR - the Russia-based M Finans and CAR-based Lobaye Invest, as well as on their managers Dmitry Sytii, Yevgeniy Khodotov and Alexander Kuzin.

The Treasury Department also designated Okeanos, a Russia-based technology company, allegedly for cooperating with Russian security agencies in the field of underwater operations, including in Crimea.

The sanctions target Okeanos' senior officials - Director General Elena Ivanova, Deputy Director General Boris Gaykovich, Marketing Director Nadezhda Kuchumova and spokesperson Vladislav Zanin.

Another newly sanctioned company is a Finland-based Optima Freight, accused of acquiring underwater equipment in an effort to evade US sanctions as well as its owner Nikita Kovalevskij and his other assets GCH Finland, Unicum Trade and ACEX.

As a result of designations, all property and interests in property of these persons that are in within the possession of US persons are blocked, and US persons are generally prohibited from engaging in transactions with them, the Treasury Department said.

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US, Allies Boost Baltic Missile Defense Cooperation in 'Astral Knight' Exercise - General

WASHINGTON, September 23 (Sputnik) - US and allied forces during the Astral Knight 2020 exercise enhanced air and missile defense integration in the Baltic region, Major General Derek France told reporters on Wednesday.

Astral Knight 2020 is a joint, multinational exercise taking place from September 17-25 with participation of service members from the US, Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia and Sweden. "This exercise allows us to demonstrate, to test and to learn our ability to execute integrated air and missile defense," France said during a telephonic press briefing. "It also allows us to enhance our partnerships across the Baltic region between US partners and other nations, as we share common interests and maintaining Europe safe, secure and prosperous."

The major goal is to enhance command control integration, improve coordination, interoperability, as well as land and air capabilities.

Astral Knight is a defensive exercise and does not focus on the Russia's activity in the region, France said.

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Trump Announces New US Sanctions Against Cuba

WASHINGTON, September 23 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump announced on Wednesday new sanctions against Cuba, including a ban for Americans on the use of hotels owned by the island nation's leadership.

"Today, as part of our continuing fight against Communism and oppression I am announcing that the Treasury Department will prohibit US travelers from staying at properties owned by the Cuban government," Trump said at a White House ceremony honoring Bay of Pig veterans. The veterans were participants in the botched US-sponsored attempt to invade Cuba in 1961. The Treasury Department issued a statement saying any person subject to US jurisdiction will be prohibited from lodging, paying for lodging or making any reservation for or on behalf of a third party to lodge at any property that the US authorities have identified as owned or controlled by the Cuban government, a prohibited Cuban official or member of the Cuban Communist Party, and their close relatives.

The State Department is creating the Cuba Prohibited Accommodations List with identifying details of properties subject to the prohibition, the statement said.

The Trump administration is also eliminating the general authorization to organize or participate in professional meetings, conferences, public performances, clinics, workshops, competitions and exhibitions in Cuba, the statement said.

"These activities may be authorized via specific license on a case-by-case basis," the statement said, adding that the only remaining general license allows for athletic competitions by amateur or semi-professional athletes or athletic teams.

Cuban alcohol and tobacco products are further restricted under the new directive to being imported into the United States. Such items were previously authorized under certain circumstances as accompanied baggage for non-commercial use, according to the Treasury Department.

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"Today, as part of our continuing fight against Communism and oppression I am announcing that the Treasury Department will prohibit US travelers from staying at properties owned by the Cuban government," Trump said.

The US president said the United States is also moving to further restrict the imports of Cuban alcohol and tobacco.

"These actions will ensure that US dollars do not fund the Cuban regime and go directly to the Cuban people," Trump said.

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Democrats Say US Senate Hunter Biden Probe Rooted in Russian Disinformation - Statement

WASHINGTON, September 23 (Sputnik) - The Republican Senate probe into Hunter Biden's transactions with foreign officials in Ukraine and Russia earning him millions of dollars was rooted in a Russian disinformation effort to reelect President Donald Trump and undermine US security, two Democratic senators said in a release on Wednesday.

"The Chairmen's investigation is the result of Russian attempts to influence the 2020 presidential election and benefit President Trump's reelection by denigrating Vice President Biden and manipulating US political institutions to aid in efforts to weaken US democracy and national security," Senators Gary Peters and Ron Wyden said in the release.

The Republican report on Hunter Biden uncovered no evidence despite extensive investigation into wrongdoing by his father, then vice president and now Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden, the release said.

Peters and Wyden noted that the investigation has included more than 50 hours of transcribed interviews of ten witnesses and reviewed thousands of pages of documents from federal agencies. However, the finding do not support the premise that Hunter Biden's position on the board of Burisma created a conflict of interest that impacted United States foreign policy, the release said.

US House Foreign Affairs Committee Chair Eliot Engel has released a summary of 16,000 pages of State Department documents that, he said, undercut the Senate Republican "smear" against Biden.

Earlier on Wednesday, two Senate committees announced in a press release announced that the Republican-led probe uncovered evidence that Hunter Biden conducted "millions of dollars" worth of questionable transactions with foreign individuals, including with the wife of the former Mayor of Moscow Yuri Luzhkov.

The months-long investigation by the two Senate committees uncovered questionable transactions that included a \$3.5 million wire transfer from Elena Baturina, the wife of the then-mayor of Moscow, to Biden in February 2014, the release said.

The Republican probe also found that Biden gave money to women from Russia and other Eastern European countries who appeared to be linked to either prostitution or human trafficking and uncovered evidence of "millions of dollars in questionable transactions" between Biden and his business associates Ye Jianming, Gongwen Dong and other Chinese nationals linked to their government and the People's Liberation Army.

Hunter Biden was a board member at Ukrainian energy company Burisma. Ukraine's former Prosecutor General Viktor Shokin led an investigation into the firm, but the probe was subsequently closed and Shokin was dismissed under pressure by Joe Biden.

From: Martin Sieff - martinsieff1@gmail.com

Subject:

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CIA Reduces Number of Intelligence Products on Russia It Sends to Trump - Reports

WASHINGTON, September 23 (Sputnik) - The US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) has reinforced scrutiny of its information products on Russia and has reduced their supply to the White House, Politico reported on Wednesday.

The corporate media outlet quotes nine current and former officials as saying CIA Director Gina Haspel has been "extremely cautious" about which Russia-related intelligence makes its way to President Donald Trump.

Haspel keeps a close eye on CIA's "Russia House" and often disagrees with its analysts, while sometimes accusing them of purposefully misleading her.

Three sources said Haspel tasked the CIA's General Counsel Courtney Elwood last year with reviewing virtually every agency product on Russia and the post-Soviet countries before it is sent to the White House.

"Four of the people said the change has resulted in less intelligence on Russia making its way to the White House, but the exact reason for that - whether Elwood has been blocking it, or whether Russia officers have become disillusioned and are producing less, or even self-censoring for fear of being reprimanded - is less clear," the report said.

One Trump administration official explained that the development is a matter of quality over quantity the report added.

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Saudi King Calls in UN General Assembly Speech for Firm International Stance on Iran

WASHINGTON, September 23 (Sputnik) - Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud said in his first address at the 75th UN General Assembly on Wednesday that the international community

needs to take a firm international stance on Iran to ensure a comprehensive solution to Tehran's attempt to possess weapons of mass destruction.

"A comprehensive solution and a firm international position are needed to ensure fundamental solutions to the Iranian regime's attempt to possess weapons of mass destruction or develop ballistic missile program aren't its interference in the internal affairs of other countries as well as its sponsorship of terrorism," the Saudi King said.

Saudi Arabia's experience with Iran has taught the country that partial solutions or appeasement will not stop its threats to international peace and security, the Saudi King added.

Saudi Arabia and Iran broke off diplomatic relations in 2016 after the Saudi authorities executed a prominent Shia cleric. The execution prompted a wave of protests in Tehran that led to the Saudi embassy being overrun and ransacked.

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Saudi King Salman Says in UNGA Speech He Supports US Efforts for Arab Peace With Israel

UNITED NATIONS, September 23 (Sputnik) - Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud said in his address to the UN General Assembly on Wednesday that he supports the US-led efforts to achieve reconciliation in the Middle East by securing peace accords between Israel and Arab states.

"We support the efforts of the current US administration to bring about peace in the Middle East by bringing both Palestinians and the Israelis together at the negotiating table to reach a fair and comprehensive agreement," the Saudi King said.

On September 15, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain officially reconciled with Israel by signing US-brokered peace agreements at a ceremony in the White House.

The agreement signed with the UAE is a peace treaty for establishing diplomatic ties and full normalization of relations with Israel, while the agreement with Bahrain is a declaration of peace.

The accords will see the countries exchange embassies with Israel, allow direct flights, and boost commercial cooperation. The UAE became the third and Bahrain the fourth Arab state to normalize relations with Israel after Egypt in 1979 and Jordan in 1994.

US President Donald Trump has said that at least five or six more countries are at advanced stages of negotiations with Israel and may soon follow suit.

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DHS Gave \$6M In Deal to Firm That Secretary Wolf's Wife Helps Run - Reports

WASHINGTON, September 23 (Sputnik) - The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) awarded \$6 million in contracts since September 2018 to the Berkeley Research Group, a

consulting company in which Acting Secretary Chad Wolf's wife Hope helps run as vice president, NBC News revealed on Wednesday.

The reports emerged only a week before Wolf is due to face a Senate confirmation hearing on September 28 as the official secretary for homeland security, the report noted.

A DHS spokesperson told the corporate news outlet that Wolf had not known about the contracts until the media questioned him on them.

Wolf has enjoyed a meteoric rise at the DHS. He became chief of staff at the Transportation Security Administration (TSA), a component agency at DHS, and was promoted to chief of staff to then-Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen in 2018 before succeeding her as acting secretary in November of that year, the report said.

Berkeley Research Group did not have any contracts with any DHS agency until Wolf joined the department as TSA chief of staff in 2017, the report added.

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US Sanctions 8 Individuals, 7 Entities Over Alleged Russian Interference - Treasury

WASHINGTON, September 23 (Sputnik) - The United States has imposed sanctions on eight individuals - Russian citizens or of Russian decent - and seven entities in Russia, Finland and the Central African Republic over alleged foreign interference and sanctions evasion, the US Treasury announced in a statement on Wednesday.

"Today, the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) took further action against the network of Kremlin-connected Russian operative Yevgeniy Prigozhin (Prigozhin), by targeting entities and individuals working on behalf of Prigozhin to advance Russia's influence in the Central African Republic (CAR). Concurrently, OFAC is targeting those that have supported the Russian Federal Security Service directly, as well as those that assist persons helping designated Russian actors to evade US sanctions," the statement said.

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US House Democrats Draft Reforms Bill to Check President's Powers

WASHINGTON, September 23 (Sputnik) - The Democrats in the US House of Representatives on Wednesday unveiled a sweeping package of reforms intended to reinforce checks on the executive's powers and address President Donald Trump's "litany of abuses," the Democratic leaders said during a press conference on Tuesday.

The lawmakers said they doubt "The Protecting Our Democracy Act" stands a chance to pass the Republican-controlled Senate, but expect a bipartisan support for it if Democratic nominee Joe Biden wins in the upcoming November presidential election.

"This legislative pact is sweeping and designed to address the President's staggering litany of abuses and ensure they can never happen again by anyone. This package is future-focused, intended to restore checks and balances not only during this term, but for any future President," US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said.

The legislation, which was drafted by Democratic chairs of different House of Representatives committees, seeks to prevent abuses of a pardon power, the soliciting of foreign interference in US elections, retaliatory attacks on whistleblowers and inspector generals, abuses of office for personal enrichment and contempt of Congress' oversight powers, including its subpoenas.

"I would hope that we can bring up that package this year, but I think our expectation is whether we can bring this up this year or not it's unlikely to move through a Senate which has... been a willing accomplice to many of the President's actions that have broken down this very Democratic guardrails and institutions," US House Intelligence Committee Chairman Adam Schiff said during the press conference.

Schiff also said he expects that the proposed reforms will have the support of both major political parties next year if a new administration is formed since "my GOP [Republican] colleagues will not want to see a Democratic President do half the things of the current President."

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US Senate Uncovers Questionable Transactions Between Hunter Biden, Foreigners - Senator

WASHINGTON, September 23 (Sputnik) – A Republican-led probe has uncovered evidence that Hunter Biden conducted "millions of dollars" worth of questionable transactions with foreign individuals including Elena Baturina, the wife of the former Mayor of Moscow Yuri Luzhkov, two Senate committees announced in a press release on Wednesday.

"US Senators Ron Johnson, chairman of the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, and Chuck Grassley, chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, released a report that revealed millions of dollars in questionable financial transactions between Hunter Biden and his associates and foreign individuals, including the wife of the former mayor of Moscow and individuals with ties to the Chinese Communist Party," the two committees said in the release.

The months-long investigation by the two committees uncovered questionable transactions that included a \$3.5 million wire transfer from Baturina to Biden, the release said.

The transaction was carried out in February 2014, when Baturina transferred money for a "Consultancy Agreement" to Rosemont Seneca Thornton, an investment firm co-founded by Hunter Biden, the two committees said in their final report on the investigation.

The probe also found that Biden gave money to women from Russia and other Eastern European countries who appeared to be linked to either prostitution or human trafficking.

The investigation also uncovered evidence of "millions of dollars in questionable transactions" between Biden and his business associates Ye Jianming, Gongwen Dong, and other Chinese nationals linked to the Communist government and People's Liberation Army, the release said.

Moreover the investigation revealed that former Deputy Chief of Mission at the US Embassy in Ukraine George Kent in 2015 and 2016 warned then-Vice President Joe Biden's office about his concerns that Hunter Biden's role on Burisma's board could create the perception of a conflict of interest. These concerns, went unaddressed, the probe found.

"These were just some of the findings from investigation into potential conflicts of interest arising from Hunter Biden accepting a position on the board of, and taking millions of dollars from, Burisma, a Ukrainian energy company with a long-standing reputation for corruption, while his father, Joe Biden, was vice president and the public face of the Obama administration's handling of Ukraine policy," it added.

The report is "almost exclusively" based on records from US sources, including government, entities and individuals, Johnson said via Twitter.

Democrats have criticized the investigation as a "politicized" attempt to influence the election and are expected to release their own report countering the Republicans' findings.

Hunter Biden was a board member at Ukrainian energy company Burisma. Ukraine's former Prosecutor General Viktor Shokin led an investigation into the firm, but the probe was subsequently closed and Shokin was dismissed. According to media reports, Shokin said the investigation had been ended out of fear of the United States.

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Johnson & Johnson Launches Phase 3 COVID-19 Vaccine Trials - Company Statement

WASHINGTON, September 23 (Sputnik) - US corporation Johnson & Johnson has started its Phase 3 trials of a possible single-shot COVID-19 vaccine, the company said in a press release on Wednesday.

"Johnson & Johnson (NYSE: JNJ) (the Company) today announced the launch of its large-scale, pivotal, multi-country Phase 3 trial (ENSEMBLE) for its COVID-19 vaccine candidate, JNJ-78436735, being developed by its Janssen Pharmaceutical Companies," the release said.

The final stage of the study will be conducted on 60,000 adult volunteers in the United States, Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, Peru and South Africa, the release said.

The Johnson & Johnson single-dose shot is the fourth vaccine candidate to enter late-stage testing in the United States, after Moderna, Pfizer/BioNTech and AstraZeneca. began similar trials. The other vaccine candidates require two doses.

The company plans to include in its study members of populations that have been disproportionately affected by the COVID-19, including Black, Hispanic, American Indian and Alaskan Native volunteers, the company said.

According to WHO protocols, a candidate vaccine has to complete three phases of clinical trials to be approved for industrial production.

Phase 1 normally involves small-scale studies on up to 100 participants to determine a candidate vaccine's safety and clinical tolerance. Phase 2 can include up to 1,000 and is more representative in terms their age, ethnicity and other statistically significant factors. This phase

pursues to determine the optimal dose, intervals between doses and the minimum necessary number of doses in a target population.

Phase 3 trials are the largest and can include up to 10,000 participants with the maximum representation of target population categories. A candidate vaccine is ready to move into industrial production if this last phase provides clear and definitive evidence of its safety and efficacy.

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RPT: ANALYSIS - Facebook's New Election Ad Regulations May Boost Biden

WASHINGTON, September 23 (Sputnik) - Facebook's policy to remove misleading election-related information ahead of the November vote may benefit Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden's campaign, experts told Sputnik.

In early September, Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg announced that any posts using COVID-19 to discourage voters will be removed along with content that seeks to delegitimize the outcome of the November 3 election. The social media giant said the move is intended to "protect" the integrity of the election process.

BIDEN BIAS

US President Donald Trump has repeatedly warned that mail-in ballots will lead to mass election fraud. Many believe the Democrats will benefit more from mail-in ballots because their constituents are more concerned about the pandemic. Twitter has labeled Trump's tweets about mail-in ballot fraud as disinformation on several occasions.

Eurasia Center Vice President Earl Rasmussen said Facebook's approach will likely not affect the candidates equally, noting that already there are efforts to block ads against mail-in ballots. "It will be the Facebook god that will determine which ad is so called political or non-political," Rasmussen told Sputnik. "I would not be surprised if these measures favor the Biden camp more."

Such a policy may prevent some non-profit or private ads among other notifications, which Facebook may consider as politically oriented, he added.

"They obviously will be emphasizing a specific issue. What about 'Black Lives Matter' ads or for that matter 'Blue Lives Matter'? Is this not controlled media or some private company form of censorship? I think it is highly likely that numerous ads will occur and they will benefit one side or the other," Rasmussen said.

Rasmussen also said Facebook's new policy will be difficult to implement. Facebook will be able to stop direct political ads, but reposts and other issue-related ads may be hard to detect.

Political commentator Bill Boerum also believes the Democrats may gain more advantages from Facebook's new policy.

"This year, responding to social justice concerns... young people and blacks may turn-out in higher proportions than their historical performance, thus likely benefiting the Democrats. Republicans could see the Facebook measures as a veiled effort to accomplish the latter," Boerum told Sputnik.

SIGNS OF CENSORSHIP?

Republicans, including Trump, have been irate about how Twitter and Facebook have attached "fact-checking" labels to content deemed disinformation, accusing the companies of censorship. Dan Lazare, a political commentator, told Sputnik he does not care how benign or well-intended Facebook claims to be, the result is a giant step toward censorship and political regimentation. Lazare also said he disagrees with civil libertarians who may counter that none of this matters because Facebook is a private company.

"The fact is that Facebook is doing this under intense congressional pressure, which means that its actions are nothing more than government censorship one step removed," Lazare said.

"Should phone companies regulate what people say over their lines? How about bartenders and restaurateurs? Should they keep an ear cocked in case one customer tells another something that's that's untrue or misleading?"

Lazare said the answer to bad speech is good speech in terms of what is posted on Facebook and other outlets.

"If someone is spreading bad ideas, then counter him or her by spreading good ideas of your own. Rather than relying on the government or some giant corporation - do it yourself. And it strikes me as supremely irrelevant whether bad ideas are spreading via Facebook [or] phone lines," Lazare said.

Boerum said some of these measures can be seen by some as private sector censorship, although this has been a challenge for media throughout history. The answer has been to clearly separate different types of content.

"Media is supposed to have a clear line between opinion on the editorial page and journalism and objective reporting," Boerum explained.

Rasmussen, in turn, urged people to express their concerns over the current situation.

"Facebook or any other social media company that provides a public communications platform or forum should not independently censor information or discussion," he said. "Yes, they are a private company but they are essentially providing a public service. One should be very disturbed to see actions that limit a given perspective especially if there is no hate crime, obscenity, or other derogatory public comments."

Lazare warned that the current situation is reminiscent of the "red scare" during the Cold War.

"Free speech hasn't been under this much of a threat since Joe McCarthy was running riot in the 1950s," Lazare concluded.

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RPT: PREVIEW - US Syria Envoy Jeffrey to Visit Germany for Talks on Resolving Conflict

WASHINGTON, September 23 (Sputnik) - US Special Representative for Syria Engagement James Jeffrey visits Germany on Wednesday for discussing international efforts to resolve the Syrian conflict following his journey to the Middle East.

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defeat of ISIS [IS, a terrorist organization, banned in Russia], as well as our efforts to achieve a resolution of the Syrian conflict," the State Department said in a statement.

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US Federal, Local Agents Arrest Over 20 in Milwaukee Anti-Drug Operation - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 23 (Sputnik) - US federal agents arrested more than 20 defendants on drug charges in Milwaukee as part of the Operation Legend initiative to crack down on inner-city crime, the Justice Department said in a statement.

"This morning, federal, state, and local law enforcement officers arrested 21 of the 26 defendants charged by criminal complaint with offenses related to a violent drug-trafficking organization that obtained multi-kilogram quantities of cocaine and marijuana from California for distribution in the Milwaukee area," the release said on Tuesday.

Law enforcement authorities had also seized nearly 19 kilos of heroin, more than 11 kilos of fentanyl - enough to deliver more than five million fatal doses - more than 94 kilos of methamphetamine and nearly 14 kilos of cocaine, and more than \$6.5 million in drug proceeds have been seized, the Justice Department said.

US Attorney General William Barr at a press conference said Milwaukee has seen a 27 percent drop in non-fatal shootings since the start of Operation Legend.

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UPDATE - Trump Wants Supreme Court Packed Before Election, Republicans Set Date to Confirm Nominee

WASHINGTON, September 23 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump told reporters that the Supreme Court needs to be filled with nine justices ahead of the November 3 election in light of the deluge of unsolicited mail-in ballots.

Trump plans on unveiling his pick to replace deceased Supreme Court justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg around 5:00 p.m. EST (9:00 p.m. GMT) on Saturday.

"We need nine justices. You need that with the unsolicited millions of ballots that they're sending. It's a scam. It's a hoax. Everybody knows that. And the Democrats know it better than anybody else. So you're going to need nine justices out there," Trump said on Tuesday.

Last Friday, Ginsburg died of complications from metastatic pancreatic cancer at her home in Washington. Before the liberal-leaning judge's death, the high court already was stacked with a 5-4 conservative majority.

Trump has repeatedly warned that mail-in ballots will lead to mass election fraud. Many believe the Democrats will benefit more from mail-in ballots because their constituents are more concerned about the pandemic.

The election is being held on November 3 but some states will allow ballots to come in up to six days late.

AP reported that the Republican Senators are looking to begin confirmation hearings in mid-October and hope to hold a floor vote on October 29.

Judge Amy Coney Barrett is reportedly the potential frontrunner to fill the vacant Supreme Court seat. Barrett, 48, is a conservative, pro-life Catholic who is a circuit judge on the US Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit in Chicago.

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US Lawmakers Demand Probe of Pentagon Redirecting COVID-19 Funds to Contractors

WASHINGTON, September 23 (Sputnik) - Two US House lawmakers are calling for an investigation into reports that the Pentagon redirected COVID-19 funds to private defense contractors.

"For the Administration to choose to use funds Congress made available to fight COVID-19 on the wish lists of defense contractors, instead of first protecting troops and the general public from the spread of the coronavirus, is unconscionable and should be investigated fully and prosecuted if warranted," Representatives Mark Pocan and Barbara Lee said in the letter to the House oversight and armed services panels, as quoted by The Washington Post on Tuesday. Around \$1 billion in pandemic funds were converted into economic stimulus for defense contractors, the report added.

The two lawmakers asked for an investigation and public hearings on the matter following a Washington Post report.

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Trump Says Full Supreme Court Needed Ahead of US Election Amid Mail-In Ballot 'Scam'

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US Indicts Oil Trader for Alleged Role in Bribing Ecuador Officials - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 23 (Sputnik) - A US grand jury has indicted a Mexican oil trader for allegedly paying \$870,000 in bribes in a \$300 million international bribery and money laundering conspiracy involving corrupt payments to Ecuadorian officials, the Department of Justice said in a press release.

"A federal grand jury in the Eastern District of New York today returned an indictment against a trader at the US subsidiary of a multinational oil distributor and trading company for his alleged participation in a five-year bribery and money laundering scheme involving corrupt payments to Ecuadorian officials," the release said on Tuesday.

As alleged in court documents, between 2015 and 2020, Javier Aguilar and others participated in a conspiracy to pay and conceal bribes to then-Ecuadorian officials, including at Empresa Publica de Hidrocarburos del Ecuador (Petroecuador) to obtain business for a \$300 million contract to purchase fuel oil, the release said.

"According to the allegations, during the scheme, Aguilar and his co-conspirators caused the payment of approximately \$870,000 in bribes that they had promised to then-Ecuadorian officials," the Justice Department said.

The two-count indictment charges Aguilar, 46, a citizen of Mexico and resident of the United States, with conspiracy to violate the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act (FCPA) and conspiracy to commit money laundering.

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UPDATE - Esper Says US Committed to Preserving Israel's Qualitative Military Edge in Middle East

WASHINGTON, September 23 (Sputnik) - The United States is committed to preserving Israel's qualitative military edge (QME) in the Middle East, US Secretary of Defense Mark Esper said before a meeting with Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz at the Pentagon.

Esper made his remarks in light of concerns expressed by Israeli officials that the Trump administration may sell fifth generation F-35 fighter jets to the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Israel is currently the only operator of F-35 aircraft in the Middle East region.

"A cornerstone of our defense relationship is preserving Israel's qualitative military edge in the region," Esper said on Tuesday. "The United States is committed to that and the Department of Defense is committed to that imperative. We will continue to support the long-standing US priority to maintain Israel's QME."

US President Donald Trump previously said that he sees no problem with exporting fifth generation aircraft to the UAE after the country signed a peace agreement with Israel and promised to work out any concerns.

White House Senior Adviser Jared Kushner said the Trump administration will hold consultations with Israel before making a decision to sell F-35 jets.

US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said Congress will be monitoring the situation closely and vowed that lawmakers would take action if necessary to preserve Israel's qualitative military advantage in the region.

After the meeting, Gantz touched on topics discussed.

"We talked about ways to leverage regional opportunity while confronting forces undermining stability. The US is an anchor of regional stability & our countries are mutually committed to deepening cooperation, while protecting Israel's military edge—critical to regional security," Gantz said in a tweet after the talks in Washington.

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US Judge Enters Not Guilty Plea for Canadian Woman Accused of Sending Trump Ricin Letter

TORONTO, September 23 (Sputnik) - A US judge entered a not guilty plea on behalf of a 53-year-old Canadian woman charged with making threats against the President Donald Trump after her ricin-laced letter addressed to the White House was intercepted by the FBI.

The defendant, Pascale Cecile Veronique Ferrier, announced her intention on Tuesday not to hire a lawyer and was assigned a public defender by US Magistrate Judge Kenneth Schroeder, Jr.

The next hearing is set for September 28 at 2:00 p.m. local time, unless the legal counsel for the US government and Ferrier agree on an alternative, mutually acceptable date.

The defendant has asked for an identity hearing to confirm that she is the individual listed in the criminal complaint and a preliminary hearing to establish probable cause.

The US attorneys have asked that the 53-year-old Ferrier be held in custody, arguing that Ferrier is accused of a violent crime and is considered a flight risk.

The US authorities allege that Ferrier has also sent six letters to employees of penitentiaries and detention centers in Texas.

In the letters, Ferrier called Trump an "ugly clown tyrant" and said that she does not want her US extended family members to see Trump win a second four-year term in the upcoming presidential election.

All of the letters included the signature "FREE REBEL SPIRIT," alluded to the notes as a "special gift for you" and vowed to "find a better recipe" if the letters did not have their desired effect.

The FBI was also able to trace Facebook and Twitter postings, which included the hashtag "#killTrump," back to an email address bearing Ferrier's name.

On Saturday, the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) said that an investigation was underway over a suspicious letter addressed to Trump. The package was reportedly intercepted earlier in the week and two tests were conducted, confirming the presence of the deadly poison ricin.

Ferrier was detained at the Peace Bridge Border Crossing in Buffalo, New York, on Sunday. She was found to be in possession of a loaded firearms and a knife at the time of arrest.

Making threats against the US president carries a fine and potential prison term of up to five years.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY
WASHINGTON, September 23 (Sputnik)

PUTIN'S ADDRESS TO UN GENERAL ASSEMBLY

- * The 75th anniversary of the United Nations is a cause to remember principles of inter-state relations that are enshrined in the UN charter, Russian President Vladimir Putin said in his speech at the General Assembly.
- * Putin said he believes the UN Security Council should take into account the interests of all states more broadly.
- * Putin called on the United Nations to look more seriously into the matters related to cybersecurity since modern digital technologies may fall into the hands of extremist and radical groups.
- * Russia is promoting an idea of signing a deal between the leading world space powers that would prohibit a hostile use of space, Putin said.
- * Russia expects mutual restraint in deploying new missile systems as it conducts the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) talks with the United States, Putin said.

WORLD LEADERS ADDRESS UN GENERAL ASSEMBLY

- * US President Donald Trump criticized China but made no mention of Russia at all in his speech to the 75th UN General Assembly on Tuesday.
- * Trump said the United States plans to announce more peace accords with Israel soon after the Jewish state inked agreements with Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates.
- * Iranian President Hassan Rouhani in his address compared US sanctions against his country to the police killing of African American man George Floyd in Minneapolis in May after a police officer knelt on his neck.
- * French President Emmanuel Macron said in his speech that Paris seeks together with its partners to call another meeting on Libya to establish a lasting ceasefire in that country.

NAVALNY CASE

- * French President Emmanuel Macron in his speech to the UN General Assembly on Tuesday called on Russia to share information about the alleged poisoning of opposition figure Alexey Navalny.

* Russia still has some difficulty with the investigation into the case of Navalny as some evidence was removed from Russia and there is no information from Germany, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

* The novel coronavirus pandemic has been especially difficult for elderly people due to the widespread restrictions, Russian President Vladimir Putin said in his video message to the UN General Assembly.

* The COVID-19 pandemic will not be the last crisis to confront humanity, so the international community should unite to prepare for even bigger global challenges, Chinese President Xi Jinping said in his speech at the UN General Assembly.

* Russian pharmaceutical company Promomed that developed a coronavirus drug Areplivir intends to release a new and improved version of the medication next year, the company's executive director Andrey Mladentsev told Sputnik.

* UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced a set of new restrictions for England, citing the spike in coronavirus hospitalizations.

RUSSIAN CONSTITUTION AMENDMENTS BILLS

* Russian President Vladimir Putin has submitted to the Russian parliament's lower house a bill "On Prosecution," amendments to the laws "On Foreign Intelligence" and "On Security" in pursuance of amendments to the Russian constitution, Duma Committee on State-Building and Legislation head Pavel Krasheninnikov said on Tuesday.

* The Russian president, according to the new draft law "On Government," will be able to dismiss any government member, including the prime minister, without dissolving the government, Krasheninnikov said.

* Russian State Duma Chairman Vyacheslav Volodin has sent the bills submitted by Putin on the implementation of amendments to the constitution to the relevant committees, the initiatives will be considered at the next meeting of the State Duma Council, the press service of the Russian parliament's lower house told reporters.

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PREVIEW - Top US Diplomat to Visit Germany for Talks on Syrian Conflict

WASHINGTON, September 23 (Sputnik) - US Special Representative for Syria Engagement James Jeffrey visits Germany on Wednesday for discussing international efforts to resolve the Syrian conflict following his journey to the Middle East.

"Ambassador Jefferey will arrive in Berlin on September 23 for meetings with senior German officials to discuss the situation in Syria and our ongoing shared efforts to ensure an enduring defeat of ISIS [IS, a terrorist organization, banned in Russia], as well as our efforts to achieve a resolution of the Syrian conflict," the State Department said in a statement.

Jeffrey comes to Germany after traveling to Kurdish-controlled regions of Syria and Iraq. In northeast Syria, where a US military contingent is deployed, he held meetings with officials of the Syrian Democratic Forces, the negotiating delegations of the ongoing Intra-Kurdish dialogue, and with ranking council members and tribal leaders from the Dayr al-Zawr region. According to the State Department, Jeffrey emphasized that the US will remain closely linked with partners on the ground to ensure IS does not re-emerge and to achieve a peaceful resolution of the Syrian conflict under UN Security Council Resolution 2254 "by working with all Syrians opposed to the Assad regime."

In Iraq's Erbil Jeffrey discussed with the leadership of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region continued cooperation against ISIS and stabilization efforts underway in areas liberated from terrorists. He was expected to reiterate US support for "a strong, sovereign, and prosperous Iraq" and its security forces, including Peshmerga Kurdish units.

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